The Door of the Unreal

By Gerald Biss

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home after her evening out, because she heard the hell-hounds and dared not face the malign spirits in desolate places ready to spring out upon incautious travellers."

"And I suppose her unimaginative mistress discharged her the next day?" commented the ever cynical Manders, with his characteristic little laugh.

"That is very interesting indeed," I said, strangely gratified by this unexpected touch of confirmation so near home, "and quite a new viewpoint to me. Though tradition undoubtedly dies hard, it would seem to show that the werewolf has not so long been an unknown form of spiritual projection in this country as one thought, although unrecognized in its infrequent manifestations."

For a short time we discussed the question; and then I turned to Burgess.

"Now then, old chap, what I came in to do was to sketch out a map of the Dower House and its surroundings, upon which to draw out in detail our plan of action. It will help to show everyone his exact post at the critical moment without any talking and moving about, which might be heard and arouse suspicion. At such times such superphysicals are apt to be acutely supersensitive. Can you give me a suitable large piece of paper?"

"An excellent scheme," Burgess cordially agreed. "Come into my own particular sanctum, and I'll fix you up all right; and there on the wall you will have the ordnance map of the whole estate, with the Dower House every bit as big as you will want for your purposes."

So, leaving Manders to stroll out on the terrace, we went across the hall to a pleasant panelled room in the right-hand corner facing the drive. It was the most comfortable room in an essentially comfortable house, full of odd easy chairs, with a couple of low, deep couches, a big writing table in the window and another in the middle of the room, which Burgess transacted all his estate business.

One wall was partially covered by the big map he had referred to, flanked by two old Chippendale tall-boys, holding papers, while a big cupboard in the corner, which was in reality a safe, held all sorts of deed-boxes and the unsightly paraphernalia of record and organization—the whole being concealed by panelling, which opened back on hinges.

Round the other walls were prints, photographs and sporting trophies, mostly of a more personal than actual value, and over the mantelpiece was a big cigar cupboard—a regular man's room arranged for comfort and business, combined with an eye to privacy and especially confidences in a house full of guests.

It was there, if not in the hall, that Ann and he and I always sat in the evenings, when quite alone.

"That's just the thing," I said, examining the big map. "It will help to keep my proportions accurate."

Burgess soon had me fixed up and left me to my plan. Fortunately I have a bit of a knack for sketching and architectural work, and it did not take me long to rough out a small one, upon which I marked in the individual places roughly for discussion.

In a little over an hour I had the larger sketch ready as well, but without any places put in, leaving that until after a general conference upon the subject, to see what other suggestions might be offered.

I had just finished and rolled up my smaller drawing, lest perchance it might fall into the wrong hands and arouse any sort of suspicion—the larger one did not matter so much, as it was a plan pure and simple—when I heard the angry eructations of a Klaxon as a car turned in at the gates; and soon a long, low "ninety" Mercedes, with a wonderful white body, bounded up the drive with Harry Verjoyce, recognizable only by impression in his overall touring coat and goggles, at the wheel, and Bill Wellingham beside him.

They were instinct with life and audacity, ever on the lookout for what them termed "fun," which might mean anything, so long as it spelt a new sensation, preferably spiced with danger; and I knew that there I had the right stuff, especially when under the veneer of abandonment and carelessness there was the discipline of the Guards to work upon.

I went out into the hall and found Burgess greeting them as they pulled off their driving coats over their heads and revealed the very latest things in tweeds and silk socks underneath.

"What about the old Merc, Mr. Clymping?" asked Verjoyce. "I've left the engine running, as she's the devil to start. Shall I take her round to the garage, as she's got a bit of ginger under her bonnet, and isn't so easy to tackle till you know her little ways?"

"Right-o," said Burgess, laughing like a schoolboy, which did him good, I could feel. "I'll come round with you myself and show you the way, as I'm always interested in big cars, while Osgood here can mix us one of his famous bronxes against our return."

Soon we were all assembled in the hall, outwardly a cheerful enough party as usual, but with the horror ever lurking in the background, of which so far the two youngsters and Ann were happily ignorant.

"One of you may see Lord Bullingdon when he has had his nap after lunch—that is, probably about three o'clock," announced Ann officially, "but the doctors think it better that it should not be both the first time. You will have to settle it between yourselves."

"It'd better be Mill," said Harry Verjoyce promptly. "He's better at these things than I am."

"These things" was eminently vague, but we all had an instinct what he meant and what it covered.

"Right-oh," said young Wellingham gruffly; "here's luck."

And he swallowed his cocktail to cover his feelings, and Manders came to the rescue again with some questions about the big white Mercedes racer, which was Verjoyce's latest addition to his auto-stud and a very safe topic.

And then lunch, itself a merry enough meal, at which the ball was tossed about from one to another with the deliberate purpose of banishing unpleasant things to the background of memory; and I never met a better man at the game than Manders, who always seems to have the knack of the right note to keep things at the required pitch.

"I will call you, Mr. Wellingham," Ann said, leaving us over the port, "when you can see Lord Bullingdon; but don't stay more than ten minutes, please, and keep him off unpleasant subjects as much as ever you can. We want to keep the circumstances surrounding the shock as much out of his mind as we can."

Ann put on a professional manner, which was quite becoming, and would have been amusing if the circumstances had not been so grave—I might say, appalling.

"I'll do my best, Miss Clymping," said Bill Wellingham, holding the door open for her. "Trust me, though I'm afraid a poor wretched subaltern can't be counted on for the tact, to say nothing of the airs and graces, of these barrister chaps."

It was quite happy, and allowed Ann to leave us in the midst of a general laugh.

"All right, my lad," said Manders, laughing. "I'll get back on you before I've done. I often hope myself that there's more affectation than real idiocy among the junior officers of the Guards' Brigade."

Then Blenkinsopp spoke, introducing a more serious vein.

"Could you two chaps get two or three days' leave for a very particular purpose," he asked—"say from Monday to Wednesday or Thursday? It's rather important; and I'll explain the whole business later on."

"Might be wangled, Bill, mightn't it?" said Harry Verjoyce.

Wellingham nodded.

"Think so. We've both been very good boys lately, and doing quite a lot of beastly duty one way and another."

"Well then," said Blenkinsopp quietly, "I'll put you wise after Wellingham has seen Bullingdon. It's man's work I want of you both, no kid's game; and it's connected with the cleaning up of this infernal business."

The boys started, and their faces instantly grew serious, assuming a new and very business-like look.

"Then it's got to be done," they said in chorus. "We're game, you can bet."

"It may be a shooting matter," added Blenkinsopp. "Can you chaps shoot?"

"Some," replied Wellingham succinctly, pursing his lips, "and as for old Harry, he's a topper, not only high birds, but big game in Africa with his guv'nor once, lucky devil, before the old man got laid out by a rhino."

I recalled the incident a year or two back.

And then we talked on neutral subjects, such as Wellingham's legitimate grievance against his Irish tenants, who refused to pay their rents and finance him as an officer in the Guards should be financed, and Verjoyce's views of the unfair incidence of taxation upon the "upper rich," till Ann looked in at the door.

"He's waiting for you, Mr. Wellingham," she said in her dear, soft voice. "Come along."

And Wellingham clicked to attention with that serious look on his face I had liked so much all along. I knew instinctively that there was the right stuff in the lad all through—in both of them, I may say—despite their deliberately cultivated carelessness of manner and frivolity of outlook upon such a boring subject as life.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE rest of us adjourned to the library when Wellingham went upstairs, and strolled up and down the terrace until his return, less than a quarter of an hour later, all worried and anxious and glad to get on the move.

His face was white, and I could

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